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SOME ANTE-BELLUM POLITICS.

BY THE HON. GEORGE W. JULIAN.

THE pending struggle for the Presidency not only brings with it the customary revival of interest in public questions, but it recalls the campaigns of earlier times which played their part in shaping the politics of to-day. To some of these I propose to refer by way of personal reminiscence, and in order to represent them intelligibly to the present generation, and indicate the lessons which they teach, I shall restate the essential facts and conditions which preceded them and inspired their operations. To-day is the child of yesterday, and whoever would profit by the past must ponder its teachings.

The campaign of 1840 stands by itself in the history of American politics. It had no precedent ; and it can never be repeated, because the conditions which made it possible can never be reproduced. No one has adequately described it. The Whigs tendered no defined issues, and, in fact, practically surrendered both their principles and their party identity for the sake of success. General Harrison was a strict-construction Democrat of the straightest sect. He boasted on the stump that he belonged to the school of Jefferson, Mason, and Henry ; but, unlike these great men, he believed in negro slavery, and had labored with all his might to introduce it in Indiana, and thus fasten it upon the Northwest. But he was a man of revolutionary blood, and the hero of Tippecanoe. His champions also paraded him as a farmer, and a poor man who lived in a log cabin and drank hard cider ; while Van Buren was painted as a ruffle-shirted aristocrat who took his soup from a gold spoon, and was trying to unite the sword and the purse of the nation in his unhallowed clutches. The campaign opened in a memorable crisis of "hard times" and financial troubles, but the promised Whig blessing of "two dol-

lars a day and roast beef" which would certainly follow Harrison's election, and the child-like faith that all wrongs would be righted by a mere change of administration, made the Whig masses supremely happy. They seemed to be riding on a great tidal wave of "joy unspeakable," which swept everything before it. The canvass became a stupendous political frolic. Whiggery was translated into a shout, and the Democrats were silenced by acclamation. They were amazed and dumfounded beyond expression, but their solemn faces only added to the general mirth of the Whigs. The campaign was set to music, and it poured itself forth in doggerel rhymes of every conceivable quality and meter, which perfectly voiced the abounding fun and buffoonery of the hour. The stump speech was entirely subordinated to the song. Monster meetings of the people were the order of the day, and they came together as if by spontaneous impulse. There were cavalcades, military parades, barbecues, processions of log cabins and canoes on wheels, hard cider, and raccoons in abundance, and such an infinite variety of comic and grotesque exhibitions as only the genius of such a campaign could suggest.

Such was this most remarkable of all our presidential struggles. It was the farthest thing possible from a campaign of education, for its management plainly assumed that political knowledge was not wanted and would even be an obstacle to success. But it brought with it two important lessons. In the first place, the election returns disclosed the surprising fact that in the midst of this political whirlwind men were pondering the most serious question that ever made its appeal to the American people, and that over seven thousand of them had cast their votes for James G. Birney, the first anti-slavery candidate for the Presidency. This was the first instalment of that organized political action which culminated in the election of Lincoln and the final overthrow of slavery. In the second place, we see clearly that while Harrison's triumph was overwhelming, his death one month after his inauguration and the succession of John Tyler only precipitated the Whig catastrophe which was made inevitable by a campaign in which principles were given to the winds, and availability was made the sole basis of action and bond of union. These valuable lessons should be accepted as some atonement for the folly and mischief of the great hard-cider inundation.

The campaign of 1844 was totally different. In the Demo-

cratic National Convention of May 27, Van Buren was thrown overboard because of his opposition to the immediate annexation of Texas, and James K. Polk nominated as the special champion of that idea. Van Buren, then so well known throughout the country as "a Northern man with Southern principles," now demonstrated that not even so great a temptation as the Presidency, which was placed conditionally within his grasp, could swerve him from his convictions of public duty. The Whigs had had enough of the racket and nonsense of 1840. Sobered and chastened by their folly, their National Convention of May 1 unanimously nominated Henry Clay as their standard-bearer. This left no doubt about the issues, for Clay was everywhere regarded as "the embodiment of Whig principles." On the burning question of annexation he was unequivocally committed. He declared that annexation would be followed by war with Mexico, while all parties saw that it would bring into the Union a large area of slave territory, and thus powerfully strengthen the growing ascendancy of slavery over the national government. The issues of the canvass were vital, for they involved the fortunes of the Republic, as now clearly seen in the light of subsequent events. Clay had now reached the age of sixty-seven, but he was in the full possession of his powers, with the added charms of ripeness and dignity, with which time had touched and beautified his commanding personality. I had read his speeches from my boyhood, and had met him and heard him speak two years before, when he visited Indiana. As one of his young disciples, and a member of the great brotherhood of his political idolators, I entered the canvass and made my first stump speeches, which, in their spirit and substance, were similar to those which I made four years later as a Free Soil leader. The confidence of the Whigs in Clay's triumph was unbounded. Now, at last, they felt sure that the opportunity had come to crown their great chief with the honor he had so long coveted. This confidence seemed to be justified by facts. The nomination of so small and obscure a competitor as Polk was laughed at by the Whigs, and the Democrats themselves seemed at first a little depressed. The Whig tariff of 1842 was very popular, and Clay was in the noon-day of his fame. Webster was not now on the presidential anxious seat, and cordially supported the ticket; and, in fact, there seemed to be a jubilant unanimity of feeling

in the party which gave promise of a rousing victory. And this was no transient feeling. It sustained the Whigs till the last moment of the canvass. Indeed, Clay himself, in common with his friends, believed he was victorious till the evening of the day following the election. Nothing could shake their faith. The Democrats early in the struggle rallied from their temporary apathy, and gave their united and enthusiastic efforts to Polk ; but this did not disturb the Whigs, whose courage and faith never faltered. The fight was a grand one, and it was for principles. The great leaders of both parties entered the field. It was a battle between giants. In every respect it contrasted splendidly with the campaign for "Tippecanoe and Tyler too." But the fates, as usual, were against the Whigs. In Louisiana, the Plaquemine election frauds gave that State to Polk. The unfortunate outbreak of Nativism in our chief cities proved disastrous to the Whigs. Polk's Kane letter, committing himself to the policy of a revenue tariff with incidental protection, which was translated into "Polk, Dallas, and the Tariff of 1842," and emblazoned on the Democratic banners, took Pennsylvania from Clay and gave it to Polk. And the seven thousand votes for Birney in 1840 were now swelled to over sixty-two thousand, of which enough in the State of New York alone were withheld from Clay, on account of his vacillating letters on the question of annexation, to give that State to Polk. Thus faded away the fond hopes and intoxicating dreams of a great Whig victory.

When the returns at last made it certain that the "obscure Tennessean" had triumphed, the disappointment and humiliation of Clay's friends became unutterable. I have known nothing like it in the history of politics. In my own immediate neighborhood, I found prominent Whigs so prostrated by the defeat that they took to their beds and could neither eat nor sleep for days and nights in succession. Kindred experiences must have been innumerable. The sorrow of the Whigs was not merely heartfelt but heart-rending. To them all the joy of life seemed to have fled, and they utterly refused to be comforted. They felt that an overwhelming preponderance of the virtue and intelligence of the country stood behind Clay, while the larger element of ignorance and "unwashed" humanity, including Southern fire-eaters, slavery extensionists, nullifiers, and the vicious and criminal classes in all the great cities, had voted him down. They believed

that no statesman of eminence could ever be made President, and their faith in free government for the time completely gave way ; while Clay himself was overwhelmed by letters of condolence, which poured in upon him from every section of the Union, and thus gave a keener edge to his disappointment.

But the defeat of Clay was by no means a national calamity. Texas was annexed before Polk came into power, and it would have been annexed at no distant day if Clay had been elected. The poison of slavery had so entered into the life of the people, and the habit of submission to its demands had become so confirmed, that the triumph of Polk and immediate annexation only quickened the inevitable march of events. It was simply an incident of the great conflict which was to be decided at last by the ordeal of battle.

The campaign of 1848 was largely shaped and inspired by the great historic events which preceded it. The Mexican war, which logically followed the annexation of Texas, had added California and New Mexico to our national territory, and the evident purpose of the South to spread slavery over these regions quite naturally gave birth to the Wilmot Proviso, or the Congressional prohibition of slavery therein. Both the Whigs and Democrats of the Northern States were in favor of this proviso, but they wavered and faltered because their brethren in the South were against it, and the party harmony was thus endangered. This led to the formation of the Free Soil Party, which was the first formidable attempt to carry the slavery question into politics. It was a tremendous venture, and had no justification in any calculations of profit and loss. It was an open defiance of public opinion, and an insurrection against the long-established and growing power of the South. It was a declaration of war against the Whig and Democratic parties, which had become the bulwarks of slavery, and it could not fail to arouse a powerful and embittered hostility.

The Democratic National Convention met on the 22d of May, and Lewis Cass was nominated. He had been the zealous champion of the Wilmot Proviso the year before, but he now favored the policy of popular sovereignty in the Territories, as expounded in his famous Nicholson letter. It was not all that the South wanted, but with General Cass as its practical interpreter, it was accepted as a provisional policy.

The Whig National Convention met on the 7th of June. The defeat of Clay in 1844 had demoralized the party, and it was now ready for another investment in the folly of availability. Remembering its success with General Harrison, the Convention nominated General Taylor, who had never been known as a Whig, and had never cast a vote. The Whigs had always denounced the war with Mexico as a war of conquest unconstitutionally begun by President Polk ; but they now made the hero of this war their standard-bearer as their chosen means of political success. The Whigs of the free States professed to favor the Wilmot Proviso ; but their nominee was a large Louisiana slave-owner, who was entirely acceptable to the South, and in whose hands, according to every reasonable presumption, the interests of the South would be perfectly safe. As if to demonstrate all this, the Convention contemptuously voted down the Wilmot Proviso, the result of which was the immediate desertion of many thousands of Whigs, and the final dissolution of the party.

The Free Soil National Convention met at Buffalo on the 9th of August. It was an immense mass convention, called together for the purpose of organizing a new party, and composed of elements that had never before acted together ; but their enthusiasm was unbounded. The movement represented the Whigs of the Northern States, who were dissatisfied with the nomination of General Taylor and the repudiation of the Wilmot Proviso ; the Democrats who could not support General Cass since his change of base as proclaimed in his Nicholson letter, and who longed for the opportunity to rebuke their party for its treatment of Van Buren four years before ; and the Liberty Party, which was now ready to disband and affiliate with a larger movement committed to its essential doctrines. An admirable platform of principles was agreed upon, and the somewhat discordant elements finally harmonized by the nomination of Martin Van Buren for President and Charles Francis Adams for Vice-President. The campaign opened with the watchwords, " Van Buren and Free Soil, Adams and Liberty," and the contest was bitter and remorseless beyond all precedent. It is impossible now to conceive the immeasurable wrath and scorn which were lavished upon the men who deserted the old parties. The fight became ferocious, and the warfare between the Whigs and Free Soilers in the West was only matched by that of the Barnburners

and Old Hunkers in New York. Among the great Free Soil leaders in that State, John Van Buren, or "Prince John" as he was then named by common consent, was the "bright particular star." He was tall, graceful, and commanding. As a stump speaker he was a genius. His power over a great audience was phenomenal. Men of all shades of opinion were drawn to him by the indescribable charm of his personality. In repelling the savage assaults of the Hunker Democracy his thrusts were sometimes terrific, of which a striking example was given the year before, in meeting the brutal attacks of the pro-slavery press upon Silas Wright. An Albany journal completely outdid all its rivals in an atrocious assault written just after his sudden death, and without any knowledge of the fact. Referring to this, Van Buren said: "The blow which was aimed at the living statesman fell upon his new-made grave, and by an inscrutable providence his assassin was transformed into a jackal."

The effects of this campaign were most remarkable, and they show the power of a small and hated party to accomplish great and far-reaching results. General Taylor was elected, but his triumph proved the death of the Whig party. The long-coveted prize of the Presidency was snatched from General Cass, and the Democratic party was divided and humiliated by the struggle to serve two masters, while the friends of Van Buren had their longed-for revenge. The Free Soil ticket failed to carry the electoral vote of a single State, but the movement placed Chase in the United States Senate from Ohio, and sent to the lower branch of Congress a sufficient number of anti-slavery men to hold the balance of power in that body. It saved Oregon from the curse of slavery, with a territory nearly equal to that of the original thirteen States. It took the lead in the work of dedicating the public lands to actual settlement, which was finally consummated in 1862, and in compelling the admission of California into the Union as a free State; while it was the prophecy and parent of the larger movement which triumphed in 1860, and crowned itself with glory in suppressing the rebellion and giving freedom to the slave. These were great and magnificent achievements; and yet the members of the little party which stood behind them were then branded as fanatics for throwing away their votes!

But in awarding these honors to the Free Soil party, it should be frankly admitted that its leaders unwittingly did General Tay-

lor a great injustice in this campaign. His administration was not the hand-maid of slavery, nor was he the tool of any party or faction. Early in his official life he disclosed the fact that he had a mind of his own, and that the rule of his life was fidelity to his convictions. He set his face like flint against Clay's scheme of compromise, and confronted the great leaders of both parties, including his own son-in-law, Jefferson Davis, in maintaining his position. Taylor's plan of settlement in 1850 looked to the early admission of California and New Mexico as States, without executive or congressional intermeddling with their fortunes. He believed this policy would settle their condition in the interest of freedom. He thought California should be admitted at once, on its own merits, without being loaded down with a Texas boundary bill, a new fugitive-slave law, or any other legislative incumbrance. All attempts to intimidate or browbeat him were utterly vain, and when he suddenly died, in the summer of 1850, "Clay's Omnibus," as Professor Von Holst declares, "was left sticking in a swamp," where in all probability it would have remained if Taylor had lived, for he "never surrendered." The Free Soil members of Congress who had zealously opposed his election had become his best friends, and they were as gratified to find this Louisiana planter on the side of freedom and free labor as they were mortified after his death to find Fillmore, who had been elected as a Wilmot Proviso Whig from New York, take the place of his predecessor and repudiating the liberal policy to which he had been so passionately devoted.

The campaign of 1852 is made memorable by the platforms then adopted by both the great parties. These platforms were the outcome of Clay's famous compromise of 1850, which abandoned the Wilmot Proviso and provided for the admission of additional States, with or without slavery, as their people might determine; enacted a new and very exasperating fugitive-slave law; extended the boundaries of Texas so as to add a vast area of free soil to slavery, and gave her ten millions of dollars besides; and enacted a law which pretended to abolish the slave trade in the District of Columbia, but did not. In the light of antecedent facts it is not surprising that these enactments were accepted by both parties as a "final settlement" of the slavery question. As to the Democrats, their experience in 1848 with General Cass and his Nicholson letter had convinced them that nothing was to

be gained by mincing matters, and that a hearty, complete, and unhesitating surrender to the demands of their Southern brethren was the surest means of success. Accordingly, in their National Convention of the first of June, which nominated Pierce and King, they declared the fugitive-slave law to be equally sacred with the Constitution, and pledged the party to "resist all attempts at renewing in Congress, or out of it, the agitation of the slavery question, under whatever shape or color the attempt may be made." It was just as natural for the Whigs, after their surrender in 1848, to follow this example in their National Convention of the 16th of June, which nominated Scott and Graham. They accordingly expressed their acquiescence in the compromise acts of 1850 "as a final settlement, in principle and substance, of the subjects to which they relate"; and they deprecated "all further agitation of the questions thus settled as dangerous to our peace," and pledged the party "to discountenance all efforts to continue or renew such agitation, whenever, wherever, or however made." Here, indeed, was a real novelty in our politics. The sole issue in this campaign was slavery, and on this the rival parties were perfectly agreed. Their only strife was for the offices, and to this end each did its best to outdo the other in solemn asseverations of loyalty to the South. Both were not only willing, but anxious, to surrender the constitutional right of free speech in furtherance of party success, and this they proposed to do by reviving and applying to the whole people of the United States the gag rule of Atherton, of New Hampshire, which had been abrogated after a struggle of ten years under the heroic leadership of John Quincy Adams. The folly of this action is only equalled by its enormity, but its logic was unanswerable. If slavery was to be taken entirely out of politics and placed beyond the power of legislation it could only be done by totally suppressing free discussion. No wrong under the sun is secure while the right is regarded as sacred, and no one saw this more clearly than John C. Calhoun and his disciples. But they knew that it was as impossible to suppress the freedom of speech as to imprison the winds or stay the tides of the sea. The attempt of the Whigs and Democrats to do this was as futile as the Pope's bull against the comet, or Mrs. Partington's broom in mopping out the Atlantic. When these platforms were made *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was reaching the hearts of

millions on both sides of the Atlantic, and playing its part in creating that public opinion of the civilized world which clearly foreshadowed the downfall of slavery. The tide of anti-slavery agitation was then nearing its flood, as shown by the numerous publications called forth by Mrs. Stowe's book, and the astonishing circulation of Sumner's great speech on the fugitive slave law. Agitation pervaded the common air. It found its way to the fireside and the social circle. It met the people at every turn. The very measures which the party platforms pronounced a finality gave it a sort of omnipresence, while the agitation of the party leaders themselves to *prevent* agitation only made still more ridiculous their attempt to silence it. And its suppression, if it had been possible, would have given us an absolute despotism in exchange for our free system of government.

In the light of to-day it seems utterly incredible that the events of this campaign could ever have happened. The conscience of the nation then touched its lowest point in the history of the Republic, if it did not reach the dead line; but many eminent men who in later years have rendered great and patriotic service to the country joined hands in this work of national humiliation. Mr. Seward scouted the idea of doing anything for the cause of freedom except through the Whig party, which in this very campaign dug the grave in which it was soon afterwards buried. Abraham Lincoln, who only six years later in his famous debate with Douglas, talked so eloquently about "a government half slave and half free," took the field on the platform which commanded silence on the only living issue of the time. All the great party leaders on both sides united in this unhallowed attempt to pacify their Southern brethren and eternize slavery, because their eyes were not yet anointed and they saw men as trees walking. But "the day is darkest before the dawn." Partly through the reaction which inevitably followed the madness of their measures, and partly through the teaching of events, the national conscience was resurrected, and a new heavens and a new earth appeared. Let no man despair of the Republic after such a trial and such a triumph.

The canvass of the Whigs in this struggle was utterly without heart or enthusiasm. Some of the Southern Whigs distrusted General Scott, while several of the Northern Whig leaders made themselves the laughing-stock of the country by their policy

of "spitting upon the platform and swallowing the man who stood upon it." The Democrats were united. Notwithstanding their monstrous platform they succeeded in persuading the leading Barnburners of 1848 to return to the party and muster again in the army of slavery. General Dix, the Van Burens, David Dudley Field, Samuel J. Tilden, and one hundred thousand others in the State of New York alone, who had supported the Free Soil ticket of 1848, were now fighting for Pierce. They were not Free Soil men, but Van Buren men, who had been fighting for "liberty and revenge."

The Free Soil National Convention met at Pittsburgh on August 11, and nominated Hale and Julian. They adopted substantially the platform of 1848, with a few important additions. The party was then known as the Free Democracy, and the Convention declared that it was "not organized to aid either the Whig or Democratic wing of the great slave-compromise party of the nation, but to defeat them both ; and that, repudiating and renouncing both as hopelessly corrupt and utterly unworthy of confidence, the purpose of the Free Democracy is to take possession of the Federal government and administer it for the rights and interests of the whole people."

The real enthusiasm of the campaign was in their ranks. They had no dream of success or even of carrying a single electoral vote ; but they were profoundly in earnest, and united as one man. They really enjoyed the campaign, notwithstanding the smallness of their number, and the great odds against them. They had the courage of their opinions, and were animated by the enthusiasm of a great cause. The result of the canvass was a surprise to all parties. Pierce received 254 electoral votes, and Scott but 42, representing only four States of the Union. Hale received a little more than 156,000 votes, so that nineteen-twentieths of the voters of the United States in 1852, only a little more than ten years before Lincoln's preliminary proclamation of emancipation, voted for the finality and sacredness of the surrender made by Congress in 1850, and for the suppression of the freedom of speech as a means to that end ; while only one-twentieth had the courage to claim their souls as their own. These were disheartening facts after a quarter of a century of anti-slavery agitation ; for the deluded masses, who had been moulded and kneaded by the plastic touch of the South into such unworthy

uses were the only possible material from which recruits could be drawn for a great party of the future, which should regenerate our politics and re-enthroned the love of liberty. But the members of the little party never lost their faith. The mercenary and trading element, which had acted with them in 1848, was now eliminated, and no better or purer political organization ever existed. Its members felt perfectly sure of their triumph, because they knew that the unjust thing shall not prosper. And they made good their purpose to "take possession of the Federal government and administer it for the rights and interests of the whole people," for they were the nucleus and inspiration of the great movement which finally accomplished the work.

Of the Free Soil leaders of national repute in 1848 and 1852, one only survives. The names of these men, so familiar to the public in their generation, are now rarely mentioned, but what they wrought endures. The question which so stirred their blood and kindled the wrath of their opponents has been lifted out of the tangle and jargon of debate into the clear light of accomplished facts. This is their sufficient reward, and will be their enduring renown. The lesson of their struggle and triumph is the inestimable value of political courage. They planted their feet upon the rock of principle and bided their time. If they had taken counsel of their fears and faltered in the face of a powerful and intolerant opposition, a divided union or a slave empire would have been the result. The same political courage is needed in dealing with the foreign and domestic policy of the government to-day, while the lack of it has brought upon the country its prolonged financial troubles and made the people afraid of their rulers. History is repeating itself. The present state of our politics recalls the tactics of 1852. Nothing is more to be deplored than the statesmanship which employs its time in finding out which way the wind blows and trimming its sails accordingly, instead of bravely appealing to fundamental principles as its never-failing guide.

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